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No cure for what ails us:
The media-constructed disconnect between
societal problems and possible solutions

A submission to
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Abstract

This research examined the attributes of three social problems – pollution, poverty, and incarceration – in 300 news articles from 1995 to 2000. Content overwhelmingly indicated no specific cause, effect or responsible agent for the problem; rarely mentioned non-profit citizen organizations or the individual-level terms ‘environmentalist,’ ‘activist’ and ‘advocate’ in content. Media coverage also did not discuss any likelihood that these problems could be solved and did not report any calls for reader action. It is suggested that media content may have promoted political apathy due to a lack of connection between the social problem, non-profit citizen organization activities and individual behavior.

Key Words:

apathy, non-profit organizations, media framing, social problems

NO CURE FOR WHAT AILS US: THE MEDIA-CONSTRUCTED DISCONNECT BETWEEN SOCIETAL PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Much research has been done on media representation of non-profit citizen organizations, the issues that these organizations battle and the problem of public apathy. However, these three overlapping areas of research have remained remarkably distinct. Studies examining the representation of non-profit citizen organizations have centered on issues of manifest content regarding the group itself.¹ Analyses of predominant social problems in the media have largely examined stereotypical representations of those affected,² and studies examining public apathy have principally measured attitudes and behavior after exposure to explicit political messaging.³ Yet, no research has examined representation of non-profit citizen organizations and individual activism in media content explicitly focused on a social problem.

This research attempts to examine how non-profit citizen organizations and individual actions are represented in newspaper coverage of the social problem itself. Rather than examining explicit coverage of individual activism or non-profit citizen organization activities, this research examines these issues in relation to content about three pressing social problems: poverty, pollution and incarceration. What is framed as the cause, effect and responsible agent for these problems in newspaper content? Does the text suggest any likelihood that these problems will be solved at all? Are local and national non-profit organizations mentioned, and if so, how? Are individual-level terms, such as 'activist' or 'environmentalist' mentioned in the text? Finally, are there any individual calls to action? These questions help to determine if newspaper content about social problems communicate any sense of what individuals and non-profits, both key components to the process of social change, are doing to alleviate pollution, poverty and incarceration.

Learning about Social Problems through the News

Research has shown that readers often forget specific elements of media stories, but retain general impressions⁴ that later become integrated into their own perceptions of the world.⁵ News provides information that can play a fundamental structural role in decision-making⁶ about the surrounding world and shapes people's perceptions of that which they cannot experience directly.⁷ News in particular is an authoritative version of reality⁸ that specializes in "orchestrating everyday consciousness – by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity."⁹

Yet, these media-created perceptions have been found to create a lack of individual efficacy,¹⁰ otherwise defined as a person's belief that she or he can affect political and social events by individual efforts.¹¹ This media-induced political disaffection has been said to put democracy itself at risk.¹² The state of America, according to numerous scholars studying manifest political content, appears bleak: deep cynicism toward the political system;¹³ widespread lack of caring about the political process;¹⁴ and a steadily declining faith in democratic institutions¹⁵ and voter turnout¹⁶ that becomes evident after exposure to political candidate media coverage¹⁷ or political horse-race news coverage.¹⁸ Media have resorted to sound bites,¹⁹ sensationalism,²⁰ "attack" journalism,²¹ and unexplained news²² in recent history and the result is an undermined social capital.²³ Gamson et. al²⁴ summarize that "the media generally operate in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence, rather than active citizenship and participation."

While the conclusions of these scholars are certainly profound, none of these studies address coverage of non-profit citizens or social problems in particular. If media coverage of political content is as bleak as these scholars suggest, then is there any difference in how readers

learn about social problems or non-commercially motivated organizations that could reverse, or at least balance, this apathetic trend in political media content? Public knowledge of non-profit citizens and societal problems is crucial given that any information gained is generally only learned through the news media. Gitlin²⁵ states that the media image “tends to become ‘the movement’ for wider publics and institutions who have few alternative sources of information, or none at all, about it.” It has been found that knowledge of social problems is often not the result of visible or identifiable conditions directly surrounding an individual or society at large.²⁶ Consequently, the public’s only understanding of social issues derive from a construction provided by media over time.²⁷

Research examining media coverage of social problems has typically focused on false assumptions and stereotypical portrayals of those affected.²⁸ For example, poverty has been found to be disproportionately portrayed as an African-American problem even though Blacks make up less than one-third of the poor, but one out of every three poor persons in the media are African-American.²⁹ Further, Blacks are more likely to be in unsympathetic and unpopular poverty stories.³⁰ Poor people in general are often stereotypically portrayed as lazy, sexually irresponsible, and criminally deviant.³¹

Criminals are stereotypically represented as pathological individuals living in poverty-stricken urban areas and often suffering from alcohol and drug abuse.³² Yet, statistics show that among violent offenders, 62% in State prisons and 80% in Federal prisons were not on alcohol or drugs when they committed the crime.³³ Coverage of pollution has been found to be more relevant to upper classes³⁴ although those in lower-socioeconomic classes suffer the most from health problems that are caused or exacerbated by environmental problems.³⁵ Further, coverage

of pollution has been shown to increase over recent years, although there has been an overall reduction in pollution.³⁶

Research concerning media representation of non-profit citizen organizations in general was not readily available. However, information regarding the role of non-profits in the United States reveals that the nonprofit sector encompasses more than one and a half million organizations with operating expenditures in excess of \$600 billion.³⁷ In 1996, non-profit citizen organizations spent between 55 and 70 million dollars on political advocacy campaigns, constituting roughly one-seventh of the 400 million dollars expended on political advertising during the 1996 elections by parties, candidates, and others.³⁸ The American Association of Fundraising Counsel reported that charitable giving reached an all-time high of \$240.92 billion in 2002, which equates to 2.3 percent of America's gross domestic product.³⁹ The Independent Sector estimates volunteerism with non-profit organizations at 83.9 million American adults, or 44 percent of the adult population.⁴⁰ The power and reach of non-profits led President Clinton to write "in many cases it is nonprofit organizations that convert philanthropy into results -- helping people in need, providing health care and educating our Nation's youth. The nonprofit sector is an integral component of our national life."⁴¹

In a summation of non-profit organization activities, the Jacksonville Community Council, which is widely seen as a national model for public involvement in analyzing and solving community problems, reported to its citizens that,

"the nonprofit sector touches every aspect of community life. The "good works" of nonprofits serve, maintain, inspire, and entertain us. Nonprofits are there in times of disaster, serving people in need. They protect and support babies, children, the ill, and the frail elderly who cannot care for themselves. They help people cope with disease and life's challenges, build skills, believe in and achieve their aspirations. They inspire and teach, help people to increase their creativity and express themselves. They give respite and recreation, arts and culture. They bring

us together to worship and practice spirituality. The community relies on the services and activities nonprofits provide.”⁴²

Clearly, non-profits play a fundamental role in serving the community, harnessing relief funds and defining social problems. While it has been found that social problems have been framed stereotypically in the media, representation of the non-profit sector – a key component in the struggle to improve those societal problems – remains unclear.

Media Frames & Attributes

News and information must be categorized if any meaningful comprehension and communication is to take place. News, like any other communication system, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings. Otherwise stated, “news and information has no intrinsic value unless embedded in a meaningful context which organizes and lends it coherence.”⁴³ The ‘meaningful context’ is the frame that shapes a news story.

Gitlin⁴⁴ has defined frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse.” While this organization of meaning bestows frames a power to record events into assembled structures, it does not fully recognize the powerful and pragmatic effect frames can have on issues in the public. Hertog and McLeod⁴⁵ state that “the frame used to interpret an event determines what available information is relevant.” This construction of power and relevance is integral in understanding the frame’s significance and alludes to the assimilation of frames by the receiver.

In further integrating public opinion and causality into the explication of framing, Entman⁴⁶ wrote that frames increase the salience of particular aspects of a story by promoting a specific “problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment

recommendation for the item described.” Further, a frame “suggests what the issue is.”⁴⁷ Thus, the frames of a story do influence how the public thinks of an issue through definitions of the issue itself, stating who is the cause of the issue and what should be done. This cognitive dimension of an issues’ attributes asks who or what is the cause of a problem, what is the prognosis, and what actions need to be taken.⁴⁸

Within these definitions of framing, research can better understand the connection between the public and the social issue. By asking who the media suggest as the cause of the problem, who is affected the greatest and who is responsible, research can uncover dimensions of apathy or involvement in media content. Carey⁴⁹ argues that the “public will begin to reawaken when they are addressed as a conversational partner and are encouraged to join the talk rather than sit passively as spectators before a discussion conducted by journalists and experts.” Proponents of what has been labeled civic journalism, have argued that when individuals are no longer “passive recipients of a data dump”, they actually “[find] a way to do something.”⁵⁰ Molly Ivins,⁵¹ a popular syndicated columnist, has argued that news articles need more calls to action, such as a simple contact phone number, so that individuals can use the information that they have learned through the news. While civic journalism officially began in major newspapers over a decade ago,⁵² scholars continue to urge that news journalism must be aimed toward a “strengthening of civic culture by working to reconnect people to their communities [and] draw them into politics and civic affairs.”⁵³ One way that the public would presumably become engaged in this process is if clear relationships are formed in the media between individual action, problems in society and non-profit citizen organizations working to combat the issue.

Hypotheses

Given previous research that found high levels of public apathy after viewing political content and the general conclusion by researchers that the entirety of mass media content promote non-involvement in society, the following hypotheses are offered to test these assumptions in newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration:

H1: Individuals and non-profit citizen organizations will be less likely to be framed in newspaper coverage as the cause, effect, and responsible agent for the social problems of pollution, poverty and incarceration than the government, industry, natural forces or neutral frames.

H2: Newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention possible solutions to these social problems than to mention no likelihood of solving these social problems.

H3: Newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention local and national non-profit citizen organizations than to omit mentioning these organizations in coverage.

H4: Newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention the term 'activist' and other issue-specific individual proponents (i.e. environmentalist, community activist, etc.) than to omit mentioning these terms in coverage.

H5: Newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention 'calls to action' than to omit mentioning 'calls to action' in coverage.

H6: Newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to report involvement from individuals and non-profit organizations in news content (as evidenced by the nine variables coded in previous hypotheses) in *The New York Times* than in the geographically-specific newspapers, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and *Houston Chronicle*.

Methodology

In order to ensure greater objectivity, two graduate students within a School of Journalism & Mass Communication were separately trained in the coding procedure. While the graduate students were trained in the coding, they were not informed as to the scope of the project. This helped to secure a strong level of reliability in the results.

Content Selection

Three social issues were selected for inclusion in this study: pollution, poverty and incarceration. These social problems in particular were selected because they have all been consistently listed as one of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press' most important problems facing the country.⁵⁴ Further, these issues have hundreds if not thousands of local and national, well-established non-profit citizen organizations working to alleviate the problems (i.e. Greenpeace, The Sierra Club, Salvation Army, SHARE, Hunger Free America, Volunteers of America, Street Law, and PEPNet). Finally, these issues have direct impact on individuals in the United States.

The article was the unit of analysis. Three hundred news articles from 1995 to 2000 were selected from the *New York Times* and from a major large-circulation newspaper in one other city that had direct relevance for that particular social problem. The *New York Times* was selected due to the powerful influence it has on other papers throughout the country,⁵⁵ which undoubtedly gives a more accurate summation of what all individuals in the United States were reading.

One hundred news articles dealing with pollution were sampled from the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Both Los Angeles and New York have been consistently ranked within the top ten air polluted cities over the last forty years,⁵⁶ thereby ensuring a significant and relevant pool of content to sample. The *New York Times* generated 243 news articles about pollution while the *Los Angeles Times* generated 231 from 1995 to 2000. To ensure a representative sample of newspaper news articles, every 4th article ($243/50 = 4.86$; $231/50 = 4.62$) was selected from the database ordered according to relevance (when sorted in this manner, LexisNexis places the most relevant documents first).

One hundred poverty news articles were pulled from the *New York Times* and the *Albuquerque Journal*, because New Mexico state had the highest percentage of people living in poverty in the United States during the 1995 to 2000 period sampled.⁵⁷ The *Albuquerque Journal* is the largest circulating newspaper in New Mexico and generated 179 news articles about poverty from 1995 to 2000. *The New York Times* published 221 articles during the same time period. Every 4th *New York Times* article ($221/50 = 4.42$) and every 3rd *Albuquerque Journal* article ($179/50 = 3.58$) was selected from the database in chronological order.

Finally, one hundred news articles dealing with incarceration were sampled from the *New York Times* and *Houston Chronicle*, as Texas has the largest prison system in the country and has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country.⁵⁸ The *Houston Chronicle* is the largest circulating newspaper in Texas. *The New York Times* wrote 108 news articles about incarceration while the *Houston Chronicle* generated 56. Every 2nd *New York Times* article ($108/50 = 2.16$) and every *Houston Chronicle* article except for the final six were included for the study ($56/50 = 1.12$). News articles from all of the newspapers, were retrieved if the term air pollution, poverty or incarceration was found in the headline or lead paragraph through a LexisNexis search.

Explanation of Coding Categories

Two coders examined article content (see Appendix for coding sheet). Within each article, coders were asked to ascertain who caused the social problem, who was affected by it and who was responsible for correcting the problem. Each frame was then divided into several sub-attributes: government, industry, non-profit citizen organization, individual, natural and neutral. For example, a given article could have found that government was the cause of the problem, individuals were largely affected and non-profit citizen organizations were responsible for correcting the problem. Coding was not restricted to only one sub-attribute per frame. Rather, all

six sub-attributes were possible (although, extremely unlikely). As Klandermans and Sidney⁵⁹ first argued, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the overall perception of an issue through these cause, effect and responsibility definitions of the issue itself. The value of 'other' was not included because an earlier study,⁶⁰ which followed a similar format, found no instance of this value when coding pollution in 1,180 mainstream and alternative news articles. However, given that this study examines mainstream newspapers exclusively and includes other social problems outside of pollution, coders were asked to report any instance of the value 'other' in news content. If another value outside of the available value options was found, appropriate alterations to the coding scheme were planned.

In an effort to ascertain generalized apathy towards the issue, coders were asked to discern what the text suggested was the likelihood of solving pollution. The question of personal apathy was also fundamental in searching the text for mentions of national and/or local environmental organizations. If found, this would suggest that readers could make cognitive connections between the problem and organizations that work to solve them. If an organization was mentioned in an article, then coverage was coded as either neutral, negative, or positive.

Direct mentions of the term "activist" as well as terms appropriate for issue-specific engaged individuals (such as "environmentalist" for pollution, "community advocate" for poverty, and "prison advocate" for incarceration) were coded within article content. Coders were instructed to allow for a large amount of latitude in coding issue-specific engaged individuals as a range of individual-level labels for engagement were possible (i.e. activist, protestor, sponsor, objector, supporter, etc.). This variable was used to gain a stronger understanding of the level of individual responsibility found for these issues in media content.

Finally, in accordance with professional and scholarly focus on a need for increased civic journalism in news content, calls to action were coded in news articles. These ranged from the listing of a telephone number for further information regarding a protest or boycott to giving an address for an upcoming fundraiser to tips for recycling to reporting the time of a public hearing. A call to action was defined as any additional information that readers could use to facilitate their own personal action.

Results

Through use of the Cohen's kappa measure of agreement, two coders generated a high 82.91 percent inter-coder reliability agreement for all variables coded in media content across the three social issues of pollution, poverty and incarceration. Values of kappa greater than 0.75 indicate excellent agreement beyond chance alone, values between 0.40 to 0.75 indicate fair to good.⁶¹ In total, there were 10 variables coded for this study. The first three variables examining the cause, effect and responsibility for the social problems generated 73.6 percent intercoder reliability. The remaining seven variables (likelihood of solving pollution, mention of local non-profit citizen organization, national non-profit citizen organization, the term 'activist,' issue-specific individual-level proponent, and a call to action) generated a much higher .869 intercoder reliability coefficient.

Frequencies

Industry was found to be the overwhelming (75.56 percent) cause of pollution within the United States (Table 1). The *standard error of this proportion* was .069, suggesting that the industry cause attribute in the general media population could be as high as 75.5 percent or as low as 75.431 percent. The relatively small *standard error of proportion (SE(p))* found throughout this study was due to the lack of variability in case values.⁶²

The causes of poverty (75.5 percent ($SE(p) = .099$), and incarceration (53.0 percent ($SE(p) = .148$), were found to be neutral. Thus, neither the government, industry, non-profit citizen organizations, individuals themselves nor the natural environment were found to cause either poverty or incarceration (Figure 1).

A majority (58.5 percent ($SE(p) = .150$) of content suggested neutral air pollution effects. The effects dimension of air pollution produced the largest percentage of individual frames with 29.5 percent. The effects of poverty (58.0 percent ($SE(p) = .193$), and incarceration (57.0 percent ($SE(p) = .198$), were also found to be neutral (Figure 2).

Government was framed as the responsible agent for air pollution in 75.0 percent ($SE(p) = .040$) of content. The responsibility of poverty (59.0 percent. ($SE(p) = .131$) and incarceration (82.0 percent. ($SE(p) = .098$) was found to be neutral. (Figure 3)

Five of the nine cause, effect, and responsibility frames for the three social problems of pollution, poverty and incarceration were under ten percent for the individual, whereas almost all of the frames (8 out of 9) were under 10% for the non-profit citizen organization. Individuals were more likely to be seen as the ones affected by the social problem than as the cause or the responsible agent. Yet, as stated earlier, neutral effects were found for all three social problems. The value of 'other' was not found in any of the content examined. Hypothesis 1, stated that individuals and non-profit citizen organizations will be less likely to be framed in newspaper coverage as the cause, effect, and responsible agent for the social problems of pollution, poverty and incarceration than the government, industry, natural forces or neutral frames. This research found that individuals and non-profit citizen organizations were not found to be the cause, effect or responsible agent for these social problems. Thus, given the strength of these findings, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

A near totality of content found absolutely no mention of any solutions for air pollution (97.0 percent, $SE(p) = .015$), with the remaining 3 percent of content reported that solving pollution was extremely unlikely. Almost all content found no mention of possible solutions for poverty (89.0 percent, $SE(p) = .043$), while the remaining 11 percent was almost exclusively found to be either extremely unlikely or unlikely (10 percent combined). No content found any mention of possible solutions for incarceration (100 percent, $SE(p) = .000$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2, which stated that newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention possible solutions to these social problems than to mention no likelihood of solving these social problems, was supported.

Eighty-six percent of news articles ($SE(p) = .024$) did not mention local environmental organizations while seventy-one percent ($SE(p) = .032$) of articles did not mention national environmental organizations. No environmental organization was named more than once in the 100 news articles sampled. If national environmental movements were mentioned in content about air pollution, it was exclusively as a brief mention without any accompanying information. The most common national organizations mentioned were National Resources Defense Fund and the Sierra Club. One hundred percent of content ($SE(p) = .000$) that mentioned an environmental organization was coded as 'neutral.'

Eighty-nine percent of news articles ($SE(p) = .031$) did not mention local organizations working to alleviate poverty while ninety-six percent of articles ($SE(p) = .020$) did not mention local organizations aimed at reducing incarceration. Ninety-five percent ($SE(p) = .022$) of articles did not mention national anti-poverty organizations and ninety-six percent of articles ($SE(p) = .020$) mentioned no national anti-incarceration non-profit citizen organizations. No local or national poverty-oriented organization was named more than once in the 100 news articles

sampled. If organizations were mentioned in content about poverty, it was exclusively as a brief mention without any accompanying information. Again, like articles focused on pollution, 100 percent of content ($SE(p) = .000$) for both poverty and incarceration that did mention a national or local organization was coded as 'neutral.'

Hypothesis 3 stated that newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention local and national non-profit citizen organizations than to omit mentioning these organizations in coverage. Given the strength of these findings, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Ninety-seven percent of content ($SE(p) = .012$) about pollution did not mention the term 'activist.' Further, seventy-five percent ($SE(p) = .031$) of content did not use the term 'environmentalist.' One hundred percent of content ($SE(p) = .000$) concerning poverty and incarceration did not mention the term 'activist.' Ninety-seven percent ($SE(p) = .017$) of the same content did not use the term 'advocate' for the poor or something similar. Another ninety-seven percent ($SE(p) = .017$) of content about incarceration did not use the term 'advocate' for the incarcerated or something similar. Hypothesis 4 stated that newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention the term 'activist' and other issue-specific individual proponents (i.e. environmentalist, community activist, etc.) than to omit mentioning these terms in coverage. This research found that these terms were overwhelmingly omitted in content about pollution, poverty and incarceration across the 5 years sampled for this study. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

There were no examples found of 'calls to action' in the 100 news articles sampled ($SE(p) = .000$) for pollution. Ninety-five percent of articles did not have a 'call to action' embedded in the text ($SE(p) = .065$) for poverty and none of the articles about incarceration had a 'call to action'

($SE(p) = .000$). Therefore, Hypothesis 5, which stated that newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to mention 'calls to action' than to omit mentioning 'calls to action' in coverage, was supported.

Heavily weighted coverage that could not have been found through random chance alone was further tested through the binomial test for dichotomous variables. These tests indicated an overwhelming skew in the data among *all* of the available dichotomous variables among *all* newspapers ($p < .001$). This finding suggested that coverage was in some way biased and statistically unfair. The runs test was also conducted but could not be computed due to the complete uniformity of results.

Associations Between Newspapers and Content

Hypothesis 6 stated that newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to report involvement from individuals and non-profit organizations in news content (as evidenced by the nine variables coded in previous hypotheses) in *The New York Times* than in the geographically-specific newspapers, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and *Houston Chronicle*. Thus, this hypothesis is aimed at locating consistent associations between variables and individual newspapers. An association is operationalized as a statistically significant relationship between measured content variables and the newspaper source. This test is necessary to determine if a particular newspaper source may be responsible for a large percentage of measured content variables.

Significance was measured through three statistical measures: chi square p values; Cramer's V, which suggests if any found significance is also important to the population; and adjusted residual scores, or the difference between expected and observed counts that demonstrates actual effects of this relationship. Strong effects of a particular case of one variable

on a particular case of another variable were found if not more than 20% of the cells have expected values less than 5. Further, Cramer's V also indicated additional strength or weakness of an apparent association. This test of strength was evaluated along a 0 to +1 scale, with 1 indicating a significant relationship that is also large in the population. Taken in total, "Cramer's V and chi-square make it possible to distinguish between a small but nonetheless real association between two variables in a population and an association that is both significant and relatively more important."⁶³

In comparing these overwhelmingly weighted frequencies across newspapers, strength in relationships according to newspaper source were extremely small. From the statistically measurable relationships between coded variables and the two newspapers within each group, there was an extreme consistency. Within news articles about pollution, two associations could not be measured due to the uniform similarity between newspapers and five relationships were found to be insignificant, meaning that there was no relationship found between newspapers and content (Table 3). Two relationships had weak strength of significance due to an acceptable p value of significance contrasted against large percentages of cells in these relationships with expected values less than 5 (60 percent) and low Cramer's V (cause variable: .001 and responsibility variable: .024). Only one relationship was found to be significant – that of newspapers and mention of local organizations: the *New York Times* mentioned local organizations more than would be expected, while the *Los Angeles Times* mentioned them less than would be expected.

Articles concerning poverty produced one significant relationship between newspapers and content - the *New York Times* mentioned local organizations less than would be expected, while the *Albuquerque Journal* mentioned them more than would be expected. The remaining

relationships found three associations that could not be measured due to the uniform similarity between newspapers and six associations that found an insignificant relationship between newspapers and content.

Articles concerning incarceration found no significant relationships between newspapers and content. Six associations found no significant relationship and four relationships could not be computed due to the overwhelming consistency of data found. Taken in sum, out of the 30 relationships, 2 were significant (6 percent), 2 relationships were found to be weakly significant (6 percent), 17 were not significant (56 percent), and 9 could not be computed due to heavily weighted data (30 percent). Thus, 86 percent of the measured relationships between newspapers and content were shown to have no association whatsoever. Therefore, Hypothesis 6, which stated that newspaper coverage of pollution, poverty and incarceration will be less likely to report involvement from individuals and non-profit organizations in news content (as evidenced by the nine variables coded in previous hypotheses) in *The New York Times* than in the geographically-specific newspapers, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and *Houston Chronicle*, was rejected.

Discussion

As other scholars have found, there are significant consequences to information learned through the media. These consequences have been found to be so profound that one scholar argued “we need to go beyond representation to the recognition that *media constitute reality* (original italics included).”⁶⁴ Harkening to the early work of Lippman,⁶⁵ the agenda setting theory⁶⁶ suggested that public salience of an issue reflects the agenda put forth by media. Other second-level agenda setting research has shown that by emphasizing certain attributes of a subject, the media influence how the public views an issue.⁶⁷ Framing scholars have charged that

by examining how an issue is framed, one can uncover how the qualities⁶⁸ of an issue help create the “reality-definition function of the media.”⁶⁹

In examining environmental pollution, Ader⁷⁰ concluded that the public actually needs the media to tell them about the importance of the environment. Otherwise, individuals will not learn this information from real-world cues and will continue to view the environment as unimportant. When readers are exposed to environmental information that discusses actual losses to the current generation, there is a sharp rise in the intent of readers to participate in environmentally responsible behaviors, such as conservation and recycling.⁷¹ Research has also shown that negative media images of African Americans influence public opinion.⁷² Indeed, after viewing negative media content, the public tends to overestimate the prevalence of Black poverty and subsequently voice a stronger opposition to welfare.⁷³ In the political arena, the press has been found to have a statistically significant effect on bringing voters to the polls, especially during close elections.⁷⁴ Media content has been found to influence “citizens’ evaluations of government, feelings of self-efficacy, and levels of participation in the political system.”⁷⁵

So, what are the implications of the findings of this research? If, as Gamson et. al. state, “a media system suitable for a democracy ought to provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives,”⁷⁶ then the results from this study have importance not only in regards to the resulting information learned from the media but also for democracy. Certainly the three issues of pollution, poverty and incarceration directly affect the conditions of citizens’ everyday lives. The results of this study bring into question the ability that readers have to gain a coherent sense from the media of the broader social forces that surround these problems.

Content in all newspapers promoted general political apathy through the overwhelming use of 'neutral' frames in the cause, effect, and responsibility attribute dimensions (seven of nine total possibilities). By suggesting no cause, effect or responsible agent for these social problems, the media may have helped to create a disconnect between the problem in society and actual ramifications. Further, the individual was not found to be the cause, effect or responsible agent for any of the three social problems – although it could certainly be argued that citizens are indeed at the heart of these issues. This disconnect between the problem and the reader would presumably lead to a sharply decreased sense of personal efficacy within the public. Put another way, why would a person find these issues to be directly relevant if they had no part in its cause, its effect or its solution? Finally, non-profit citizen organizations were not noted in either the cause, effect or responsibility dimension. This finding suggests that those who read about these social problems may not have been inclined to become involved in any larger movement or citizen organization simply because they were not making the cognitive link between the problem and organizations aimed at alleviating those problems.

There was also a near complete omission of any named local or national non-profit citizen organization in media content. Certainly, it would not be expected that mainstream news channels would continually associate a specific organization with a particular cause. However, this content analysis found a near omission of decades-old national environmental organizations such as the Audubon Society, Coalition for Clean Air, National Resources Defense Fund, and the Sierra Club. Longstanding organizations for poverty assistance such as RESULTS, the World Food Program and the Salvation Army were all omitted from coverage as well as wide-reaching national organizations for prison reform such as the Sentencing Project, Prisoner Visitation and Support, American Civil Liberties Union, and Campaign for an Effective Crime Policy. These

gaps in content could presumably lead the reader to think that there are no non-profit citizen organizations at work to alleviate these social problems, and thus, no organizations that they themselves can take part in.

Apathetic coverage was further magnified through the near omission of the terms 'environmentalist,' 'activist' and 'advocate' and the lack of public calls to action. By framing these social issues at an individual level, readers would feasibly gain the understanding that there are individuals at work on the problem. Without these connections, the problems are at best, being handled by the government, and at worst, being handled by no one. Further, almost all content did not mention any likelihood of solving any of the social problems. If any likelihood was mentioned it was almost entirely found to be extremely unlikely to be solved or unlikely to be solved. This factor would presumably encourage apathy in a public that doesn't foresee the possibility of ever conquering these issues. What encouragement would a reader have to become involved if there is no possibility for reform?

This research suggests that previous charges of media-induced apathy could be warranted, and not only at the more obvious levels of analysis, as previous studies have suggested. Prior research that examined manifest coverage of citizen non-profit organizations are important contributions to the body of research, but have not directly addressed the more dormant levels of ideological associations between the social problem, the individual and the non-profit citizen organization. Further research into this area accompanied with reader interviews and/or public opinion data would be extremely helpful in clarifying the role of media in the creation of public apathy.

Table 1Cause, Effect and Responsibility of Social Problems in Select U.S. Newspapers
(1995-2000)

	Pollution		Poverty		Incarceration	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Cause: Neutral	33	16.5	150	75.0	106	53.0
Cause: Government	8	4.0	19	9.5	56	28.0
Cause: Industry	151	75.5	24	12.0	2	1.0
Cause: Individual	2	1.0	7	3.5	36	18.0
Cause: Non-Profit Organization	0	0.0	0	0	0	0.0
Cause: Natural	6	3.0	0	0	0	0.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Effect: Neutral	117	58.5	116	58.0	114	57.0
Effect: Government	1	0.5	4	2.0	0	0.0
Effect: Industry	1	0.5	3	1.5	3	1.5
Effect: Individual	59	29.5	77	38.5	83	41.5
Effect: Non-Profit Organization	22	11.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Effect: Natural	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Responsibility: Neutral	39	19.5	118	59.0	164	82.0
Responsibility: Government	150	75.0	51	25.5	24	12.0
Responsibility: Industry	9	4.5	8	4.0	0	0.0
Responsibility: Individual	0	0.0	20	10.0	12	6.0
Responsibility: Non-Profit Organization	1	0.5	2	1.0	0	0.0
Responsibility: Natural	1	0.5	1	0.5	0	0.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0

Table 2

Coverage of Social Problems in Select U.S. Newspapers
(1995-2000)

	Pollution		Poverty		Incarceration	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Likelihood of Solution: Not mentioned	194	97.0	178	89.0	200	100.0
Likelihood of Solution: Extremely Unlikely	6	3.0	12	6.0	0	0.0
Likelihood of Solution: Unlikely	0	0.0	8	4.0	0	0.0
Likelihood of Solution: Likely	0	0.0	2	1.0	0	0.0
Likelihood of Solution: Extremely Likely	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Local Organization: No	172	86.0	178	89.0	192	96.0
Local Organization: Yes	28	14.0	22	11.0	8	4.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
National Organization: No	142	71.0	150	75.00	192	96.0
National Organization: Yes	58	29.0	50	25.0	8	4.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Coverage of Organization: Neutral	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Qualities of Organization: Positive	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Qualities of Organization: Negative	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Activist: No	194	97.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Activist' Yes	6	3.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Issue-specific Proponent: No	150	75.0	194	97.0	194	97.0
Issue-specific Proponent: Yes	50	25.0	6	3.0	6	3.0
TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
Call to Action: No	200	100.0	190	95.0	200	100.0
Call to Action: Yes	0	0.0	10	5.0	0	0.0

TOTAL	200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0
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Table 3

Associations between Newspapers and Variables Examining
Social Problem Content in Select U.S. Newspapers
(1995-2000)

	Pollution		Poverty		Incarceration	
Associations Newspaper X	P value	% Expected Less than 5	P value	% Expected Less than 5	P value	% Expected Less than 5
Cause	.001	60	.217	50	.501	25
Effect	.531	40	.233	50	.601	33
Responsibility	.024	60	.402	50	.179	33
Solution Likelihood	.536	66	.407	75	N/A	N/A
Activist	.407	50	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Environmentalism	.191	0	N/A	N/A	.558	50
Call to Action	N/A	N/A	.154	75	N/A	N/A
Local Organization	.007	0	.025	0	.307	50
National Organization	.755	0	.169	50	.307	50
Type of Organization Coverage	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Figure 1

Cause of Social Problem in
Select U.S. Newspaper Content
(1995 - 2000)

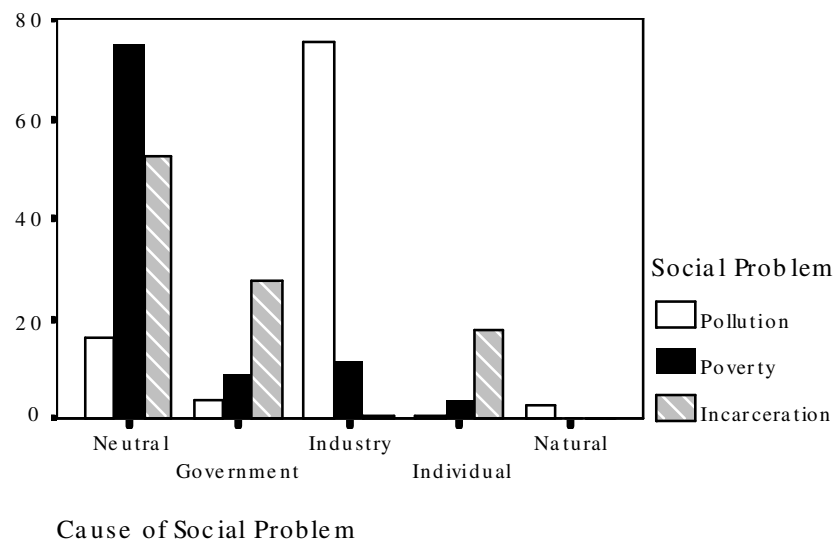
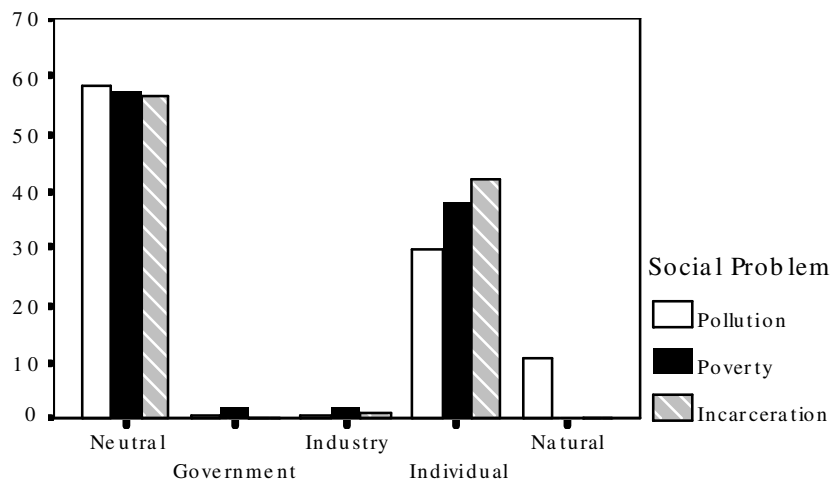
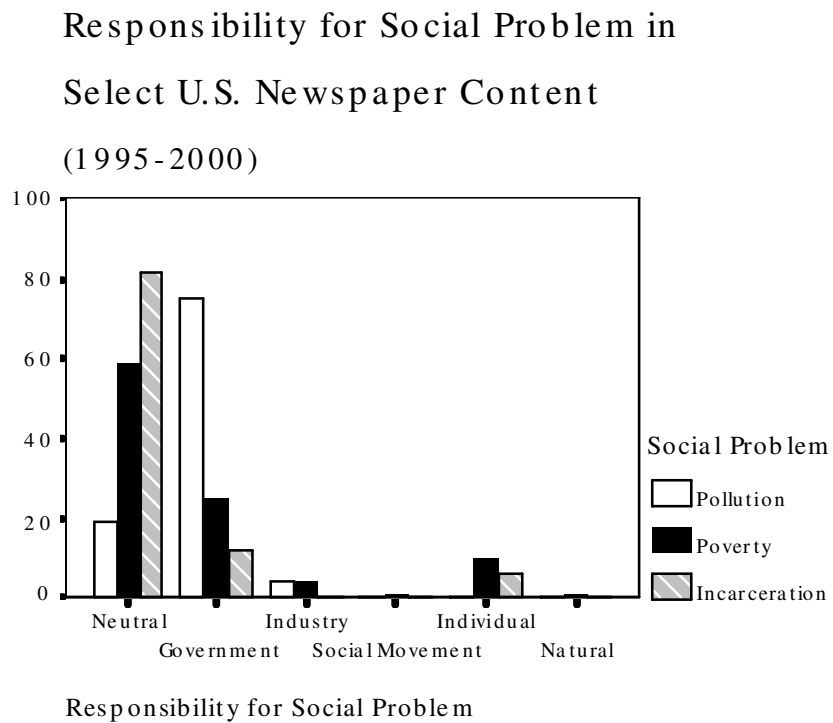


Figure 2

Effect of Social Problem in
Select U.S. Newspaper Content
(1995 - 2000)



Effect of Social Problem

Figure 3

*Appendix**Coding Sheet*

What does this article suggest is the main cause of the problem?	Government Industry Non-profit citizen organization Individual Natural Neutral
Who does this article suggest is mainly affected by the problem?	Government Industry Non-profit citizen organization Individual Natural Neutral
Who does this article suggest is mainly responsible for the problem?	Government Industry Non-profit citizen organization Individual Natural Neutral
Does the article mention any likelihood of solving the problem?	Not mentioned Extremely unlikely Unlikely Likely Extremely likely
Does the article mention any local non-profit citizen organizations?	No Yes If yes... Positive coverage Negative coverage Neutral
Does the article mention any national non-profit citizen organizations?	No Yes If yes... Positive coverage Negative coverage Neutral
Does the article mention the term 'activist'?	Yes No
Does the article mention any issue-specific individual-level proponent? (for pollution: 'environmentalist' or similar)	Yes No

(for poverty: 'community advocate' or similar) (for incarceration: 'prison advocate' or similar)	
Does the article mention any 'call to action'?	Yes No

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